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The Way Things Were

Fiction • Hayden Cox

Lewis looked away from the professor. Again. He was having a harder time keeping his eyes off his watch than he would looking at porn. Fifteen more minutes.

He bounced his leg under the classroom desk, hitting the underside every so often when he forgot how little room he had to work with. The arm rest designed for comfort felt more like a cage. “\$200 a class!” he could hear his mom lecturing him now, her voice cracking over the phone after she learned he had skipped a week of school in August to drive up to Arkansas. \$200, he thought. There are better ways to spend that kind of money. He had not talked to her since then. Last he heard she had moved to a smaller flat closer to the Jacksonville airport, a thinly-veiled attempt at persuading him and his father to come visit.

His eyes scanned the room. The soulless beige painted on the side and back wall was broken by only the occasional light or irrelevant plaque honoring some long-dead idiot wealthy enough to donate to the university but not clever enough to put the money elsewhere. Lewis did not even notice the Louisiana State University Academic Pledge framed by the door.

Most of the students had their eyes forward or on their laptops, learning the material. Poor souls. What was the point of a degree anyway when he already made a thousand dollars every weekend?

“Mr. Walsh?”

Lewis froze, moving his eyes back to the professor. Dr. Shelton was young, with a hard chin and new glasses. The man was probably only a

few years out of his doctoral program, but he already had the knack of gray-ing Sunday School teachers for knowing instinctively when students were not paying attention.

"Wh... Excuse me, Professor?" his mother's home etiquette kicking in a syllable too late. He looked Professor Shelton in the eyes as he racked his brain for any memory of the lesson.

"I asked you a question, Mr. Walsh."

His gaze flicked carelessly to the whiteboard. Dr. Shelton's scribbles were all over it in a black and white Jackson Pollock that Lewis would have paid good money to never see again. He took a deep breath, but he could not stop his temper from rising. His leg started bouncing faster. Internally he wanted to scream: WHO GIVES A SHIT! I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR GODDAMN CLASS OR THIS GODFORSAKEN SCHOOL EVERY MINUTE I SPEND HERE IS A WASTE OF MY FUCKING LIFE!

"I'm sorry, sir. I must have lost my concentration for a moment. May you please repeat the question?"

He hoped the anger flushing his cheeks would be mistaken for embarrassment.

"You ought to pay better attention, Mr. Walsh."

Lewis rolled his eyes as Dr. Shelton returned to the board. A girl in the front row with some fancy hairdo giggled. Lewis glowered at her pink and green designer backpack: family money without a day's work in her life. Lewis took off his Jacksonville Jaguars snapback to air out the few beads of sweat appearing at the tips of his hair. He put it on the desk in front of him, distracting himself with the logo. Ten more minutes.

Lewis thought ahead to the weekend. His mother had threatened to call the authorities for the whole Arkansas affair, but Lewis had smartened up since then. The weekends were better, anyway. With more traffic and more shipments, no one would pull over a 2001 Pathfinder with Louisiana plates and an empty trunk, so long as they didn't notice the extra jingling under the chassis. This Saturday was a big one, though. Mr. Leblanc, a self-titled "small business owner" in New Orleans, had ordered a huge batch of shine from his father. Lewis would have to be up at the crack of dawn to make the two trips from east Evans to the Bayou before midnight on Saturday; Mr. Leblanc didn't do business on Sundays.

Lewis glanced up at the clock again, thinking how he'd spend the profit. Five more minutes.

His birthday was on Saturday. Maybe he would buy himself an iPad or a new sound system for his car. He'd figure it out. Three more minutes.

He entertained the thought of surprising his Mom for Thanksgiving.

Flights were cheap now, and he knew she'd appreciate it, but he was still mad about Arkansas. Father had cut him back hard after that. Think of everything else he could spend that money on. Two more minutes.

A phone went off in the front of the room at the same time Lewis felt his pocket buzz. He vaguely noticed a murmur growing in the hallway, probably from students who were lucky enough to have professors without sticks up their asses. Lewis cocked his head as he noticed a few other students drop their hands to their pockets, but no one pulled out their phones. One more minute.

Lewis twiddled his fingers, but it did not take long for his curiosity to get the best of him. He read the notification on his home screen without breathing.

CAMPUS ALERT: President Trump issues state of emergency for United States. Campus closed. Seek shelter immediately. Nuclear attacks confirmed on Washington D.C, New York City, Los Angeles, San Diego, Jacksonville, and Honolulu.

A knock at the door saved Lewis from the need to think. The door opened while Dr. Shelton continued his lecture, unaware of what Lewis had just read.

"D...Do...Doctor Shelton?" A quiet girl Lewis vaguely recognized as some sort of student aide leaned her face and curly brown ponytail through the crack of the door. The hallway grew louder, but Lewis did not hear them over the words echoing in his head.

Nuclear attack... Jacksonville... Lewis forced his attention on the girl.

"Miss Marsh, what can possibly be so important that it cannot wait until the end of my class?" Dr. Shelton snapped.

While Dr. Shelton had his eyes on the door, half the class glanced at phone screens appearing by their pockets; the other half looked outside. Miss Marsh kept getting bumped from behind as what seemed like half the school sprinting behind her to get out of the building.

Lewis looked in her direction, but saw only blurs.

"STAY CALM!" a shrill, official-sounding voice rose above the tumult growing outside to no avail.

Nuclear attack. Jacksonville.

The class rushed to the door, taking Miss Marsh with them. Before Lewis knew it, the classroom stood empty except for him and Dr. Shelton.

Lewis' eyes zoned out on the white board. Dr. Shelton took out his phone, but Lewis paid no attention; he couldn't move.

He vaguely noticed his leg had stopped bouncing. What was the last thing he had said to his Mom?

Dr. Shelton sat down on the table at the front of the classroom spinning his

phone between his fingers. He stared at Lewis, but Lewis ignored him, eyes still fixed on the white board.

After a moment, Dr. Shelton put his phone back in his pocket and took a deep breath.

"Mr. Walsh, you are free to go."

Dr. Shelton spoke heavily. For the first time since Lewis had known him, the man slouched. Lewis barely noticed. Would his father mourn his Mom?

"Mr. Walsh, may I help you?" Dr. Shelton enunciated the words more strongly this time, but spoke calmly.

The room returned to silence except for the crackling of the A/C.

"Lewis!" Dr. Shelton shouted.

Lewis jumped, more at the use of his first name than at the volume.

"You cannot sit and do nothing."

"What do you expect me to do?" Lewis shouted, rising to his feet. He picked up his Jaguars hat, remembering the games his mother used to take him to.

"Evacuate. Seek Shelter. Call your family and tell them you love them."

Lewis clenched his hand. He did not love his father. His father was useful, yes, but Lewis had never been a son to him, only a tool. As a child, he was a tool to leverage against his Mom; now he was a tool for the business. His mom though... his Mom he loved.

"My Mom's dead." Lewis spoke with clenched teeth.

"Are you sure?"

Lewis hesitated. He nearly said yes, but he realized he was not sure.

"Call her."

Lewis reached into his pocket, eyes on Dr. Shelton.

"Would you like me to step out?"

Lewis said nothing as he dialed the number. The phone rang once, twice, three times...

"Lewis?" •